

Lava Beds National Monument

Wilderness Stewardship Plan – Environmental Assessment

Finding of No Significant Impact

November, 2006

Introduction

Lava Beds National Monument was established on November 21, 1925 to preserve the unique geological, natural, and historical features of the local landscape. In 1973, two wilderness units (Schonchin and Black Lava Flow) totaling 28,460 acres were designated under public law 92- 493.

The monument occupies 72 square miles within Siskiyou and Modoc counties in northeastern California, and is the site of the largest concentration of lava tube caves in the United States. The monument lies roughly 40 miles east of the crest of the southern Cascades on the northern flank of the Medicine Lake Highlands and exhibits elevations from 4000 to 5700 feet (1219 to 1737 meters). The region in and around the monument is unique because it occurs at the junction of the Sierra- Klamath, Cascade, and Great Basin geologic provinces.

An environmental assessment (EA) was prepared to analyze the environmental effects associated with implementing a Wilderness Stewardship Plan. Environmental issues identified and evaluated in the EA include Wilderness Character, Biotic Resources, Abiotic Resources, Cave Resources, Visitor Use and Experience, Cultural Resources, Socioeconomics, Fire Management, Human Health and Safety, and Operations. This EA has been developed at the general programmatic level. Implementing future Wilderness development activities would require further environmental analysis to be done.

Purpose and Need for Federal Action

In order to preserve and protect the natural and cultural resources found at Lava Beds National Monument, the Wilderness Stewardship Plan was developed to address issues and provide guidelines for managing the non- developed areas of the monument that are defined as backcountry or as designated wilderness. Monument management proposed this new plan because current management of the wilderness is inadequate for addressing management direction, consistency, and needs. This target condition is based on wilderness research, resource management studies, and historic documentation. This target condition may change in the future with results of new research and studies focused on wilderness.

Selected Action and Other Alternatives Considered

Two alternatives for Wilderness Stewardship in the monument were evaluated. The two alternatives included were: continue the current approach to wilderness management guided by Mgmt Pol and DO41 (Alternative 1, No Action) and implementing the Wilderness Stewardship Plan (Alternative 2, Proposed Action).

The selected action is to implement the Wilderness Stewardship Plan (identified and analyzed in the EA as the Proposed Action). There are no modifications from the original proposal. The plan states that all land designated as wilderness will be managed as a single unit and will not be divided into use zones. This plan also clarifies how the park defines and manages backcountry.

The selected alternative provides guidance for meeting legislative and policy mandates on wilderness management while providing recreational opportunities consistent with wilderness. It provides for implementation of goals and objectives specified in Lava Beds National Monument's 1996 General Management Plan and the 1999 Resource Management Plan. The selected alternative provides means of protecting and restoring wilderness suitability for lands identified as Wilderness. The WSP provides for a sequence of management actions necessary for effective and consistent wilderness management, including recreational opportunities for a broad range of visitor experiences and settings, while preserving and protecting the natural, cultural, and social resources of Lava Beds National Monument wilderness. The desired conditions set by the WSP are explained below:

Wilderness Experience

This section addresses the desired conditions dealing with social and managerial elements.

- Cultural and historic sites are recognized as an integral component of the wilderness resource. Past human uses of the land are understood. Values of cultural resource sites are preserved
- There are opportunities for public use, enjoyment and understanding of the wilderness, through experiences that depend upon a wilderness setting. Outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined setting exist.
- Visitors find solitude
- Wilderness dependent research is appropriate and encouraged.

Natural Resources Conditions

This section addresses the desired conditions of the natural resources and the allowable impacts of human use on the environment. Lava Beds Wilderness will remain an area characterized by an essentially unmodified natural environment: Interaction between users is very low; Evidence of other users is minimal; Area is managed to use off- site restrictions and controls on recreation use; Motorized use within the area is not permitted.

- Air quality meets Federal and State standards. There is no measurable degradation to water resources. The ability of soils to support naturally occurring vegetation communities is not significantly impaired by human activities
- Plant communities are affected by natural process and maintain their natural appearances.
- Wildlife is recognized as an integral part of the wilderness and contributes significantly to overall biodiversity. The Lava Beds Wilderness acts as a component to maintain indigenous species.

Wilderness and Backcountry

Wilderness is designated by congress while backcountry is considered ¼ mile off of all paved roads. In general, wilderness and backcountry are managed identically; however, the scope of management options is broader under the Minimum Tool Requirement for backcountry operations (i.e. law enforcement actions, fire operations).

Use of Minimum Tool

Generally speaking, as documented in the EA the "minimum tools" which may be used in implementing actions addressed in the WSP include non- motorized or non- mechanical equipment. For any future projects not analyzed in detail in the EA and which are essential to complete in order to afford protection of Wilderness, additional environmental compliance will be completed as appropriate, including opportunity for public comment on "minimum tools" deemed necessary for adequate completion of the project.

Alternatives considered initially during the scoping phase but dismissed from full and complete environmental impact analysis in the EA included the following: zoning the Wilderness, managing Backcountry and Wilderness differently, and taking no action on the development of a Wilderness plan.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The "environmentally preferred" alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed by §101 of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This includes alternatives that:

- fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
- assure for all generations safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
- attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk of health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
- preserve important historic, cultural and natural aspects of our national heritage and maintain, wherever possible, an environment that supports diversity and variety of individual choice;
- achieve a balance between population and resource use that will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
- enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

In essence, the environmentally preferred alternative is the one that "causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources".

In this case, Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) is the environmentally preferred alternative for Lava Beds National Monument since it meets goals described above. Under the selected action, Wilderness Stewardship activities help protect monument resources and adjacent lands from the threat of future degradation and development. Finally, the WSP best protects and helps preserve the historic, cultural, and natural resources in the monument for current and future generations.

Why the Selected Action Will Not Have a Significant Effect

As defined at 40 CFR §1508.27, from the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality that implement the provisions of NEPA, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

The implementation of the Wilderness Stewardship Plan would enhance the protection of the natural and cultural resources found in the monument for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. These resources include wilderness character, biotic resources, abiotic resources, cave resources, visitor use and experience, cultural resources, and natural processes. In conclusion, implementation of the WSP will not have any adverse impacts

The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety

When implementing the WSP, human health and safety is the primary concern. Under no circumstances will public health or safety be compromised.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

As described in the EA, the intent of the action alternative was to provide the maximum amount of protection for the important natural and cultural resources of the monument while protecting the wilderness for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

There were no controversial impacts identified during the analysis done for the EA. Individual actions will not be implemented without additional analysis of the potential environmental impacts.

Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

There are no identified risks associated with the selected action that are unique or unknown, and there are no effects associated with the selected action that are highly uncertain identified during the analysis for the EA or during the public review of the EA.

The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The selected action does not establish a precedent for any future actions that may have significant effects, nor does it represent decisions about future considerations. The purpose of this action is to develop a Wilderness Stewardship Plan and program that utilizes the benefits of the Wilderness Act to achieve desired natural resource conditions while minimizing the impacts to resources and adjacent lands from lack of stewardship. Under such a program, wilderness stewardship activities would be implemented over several years to enhance wilderness character. This program will be evaluated every three years and, if necessary, revised during future revisions to the Monument's Wilderness Stewardship Plan.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

The EA determined that there would be no significant cumulative impacts associated with the selected action.

The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Impacts under the selected alternative do not have the potential to adversely impact cultural resources. Management strategies will be reviewed by NPS regional staff or the State Historic Preservation Officer ensuring planned projects are in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The implementation of the WSP would have no direct impact on endangered or threatened species or their habitats. Management actions will be reviewed by NPS staff and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ensuring planned projects are in compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Implementing the WSP will violate no federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

Public Involvement and Agency Coordination

Public scoping on the WSP EA was conducted informally during 2002. One meeting was held in Tulelake, CA and one in Klamath Falls, OR as part of scoping for the Fire Management Plan. During these two meetings, Wilderness management was presented. A total of 5 agency staff from the Forest Service and 1 person from the public participated in these two meetings. It was determined at that time that further public scoping would not be necessary due to the low level of interest. The plan was drafted through park scoping meetings, reviews by staff specialists, and approved Wilderness plans received from other National Park Service units.

The environmental assessment was made available for public review and comment during a 45-day period ending September 21, 2006. In response to a press release, three news accounts were published through local papers. Also, a notice announcing its availability was sent out to 27 interested parties through the park's mailing list, including federal, state and municipal agencies, and individuals. One copy of the EA was requested by Jacqui Krizo, a photographer/reporter for the Pioneer Press. The park distributed printed copies of the EA to The Klamath Tribes, the Alturas Library, the Klamath County Library, Wilderness Watch, California Wilderness Coalition, and to the California Office of Historic Preservation. In addition, the EA was posted on the park's website and on the public access website for Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) during the entire comment period.

No comments were received during the 45-day public review in response to release of the EA-WSP. However one comment was received from the California Wilderness Coalition for the GMP scoping process that coincided with the WSP public review. This response primarily focused on wilderness expansion which is beyond the scope of this current WSP but will be considered during the GMP development. The CWC's main points were: 1) the expansion of the current wilderness areas and 2) the management of backcountry as wilderness until such time as they can be turned into wilderness. With regard to the first point, this is beyond the scope of the current WSP and is more a comment for the GMP which will be finalized during the next three years. The second point is already addressed in the WSP: "In general, wilderness and backcountry are managed identically... however greater flexibility is given to the Minimum Tool Requirement for backcountry operations".

Impairment

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the National Park Service has determined that implementation of the selected plan will not constitute an impairment to the critical resources and values of the monument. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the Wilderness Stewardship Plan and its EA, public comment, relevant scientific studies, and the

professional judgment of the decision- maker guided by the direction in NPS *Management Policies 2001*. The WSP will not result in adverse impacts to resources. Overall, the plan results in benefits to monument resources and values, opportunities for their enjoyment, and it does not result in their impairment.


Decision

The proposed action does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The proposed action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are negligible or minor in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this proposed action and thus will not be prepared.

By the following signatory authority, implementation of the proposed action and its associated mitigation measures shall commence on the date set forth below.

Recommended:


Superintendent

11-9-06
Date

Approved:


Director, Pacific West Region

11/14/06
Date